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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [SENV](#) [ETRD](#) [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [TBIO](#) [GH](#) [BIOTECHNOLOGY](#)
SUBJECT: GHANA ADVANCES ITS BIOSAFETY FRAMEWORK

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[C](#). STATE 35894

[1](#)1. Summary. Ghana is preparing a National Biosafety Framework, in accordance with its responsibilities under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (reftels). On July 14, Ghana's Biotech and Nuclear Agricultural Research Institute (BNARI) hosted a stakeholder workshop to discuss the final components of the framework. UNEP and the Global Environment Facility are assisting Ghana in this effort to develop the legal, technical, administrative and information framework to address biosafety. End Summary.

Speakers Support Prudent Biotech Use

[1](#)2. Ishmael Ashitey, Minister of State for Trade, Industry and Presidential Special Initiatives, opened the seminar speaking about the positive impact that a well-regulated biotechnology sector would have for Ghana. Biotech would contribute to Ghana's food supply by increasing farm yields, reducing costs, improving the quality of products, and improving environmental management of land and resources. Ashitey challenged the scientists, business representatives and government officials in attendance to develop the biosafety framework to harness maximum benefit for Ghana. "If science is kept in the labs," he warned, "it is of no use to the man on the street."

[1](#)3. In the keynote address, Food and Agriculture Minister Major Courage Quashigah was generally positive about the applications of biotech, but cautioned against its unforeseen hazards. "Biotech is one weapon against hunger," he said, "but as with other weapons that can backfire and harm the user, biotech needs a safety catch." He spoke of possible risks to biodiversity and human and animal health, and the potential for greater resistance to antibiotics. In another colorful analogy, he likened biotech use to war, where the repercussions from chemical exposure or trauma may not appear for years. He recognized that biotech, geared specifically to Ghana's needs, could truly improve its food security and nutrition, but warned that Ghana could find itself in a position in the future where it would be dependent on buying seeds from the "Gene Giants." He reiterated that Ghana has already made the decision to "get on the train" with biotech, but he supported starting now to prepare for unforeseen circumstances.

Overview of Biosafety Framework

[1](#)4. Alex Owusu-Biney, the National Project Coordinator for the UNEP/GEF project to develop a National Biosafety Framework, gave an overview of the components. (Note: Post can provide a copy of the draft framework upon request.) The objective of the framework is to promote research and development, but also to avoid negligence, misuse, or irresponsibility. Ghana followed UNEP guidelines and incorporated 5 key elements in the current draft framework: 1) a government policy on biosafety; 2) an administrative system; 3) a decision-making body; 4) a monitoring and evaluation component; and 5) a mechanism for public participation and information sharing. The framework would apply both in Ghana and for transboundary movement for all handling, transit and use of biotech. Owusu-Biney recognized that no country has a foolproof framework and stated that he expects the framework to evolve over time.

[1](#)5. Owusu-Biney was forthright about the challenges for the project, especially since Ghana does not yet have a biotech policy. There is a science and technology policy, which contains a biotech component, but he argued that there is an urgent need for separate biotech-specific policies. Questions regarding labeling and the role of NGOs remain to be answered, and there is confusion over how to reconcile national policy with other international agreements and guidelines. Owusu-Biney acknowledged that policy makers have a lot of work to do, including building capacity, encouraging public engagement, training decision-makers, and training regulators to handle risk assessment.

[1](#)6. Owusu-Biney and other drafters of the framework admitted that this is a very technical issue and policy makers will

have to continue to engage Ghana's scientists in the development of the biosafety framework and biotech policy. Owusu-Biney emphasized that the workshop was an important opportunity for all stakeholders to contribute to and become involved in the process. (Comment: Econoff was the only visible outsider at the workshop and Post was fortunate to have an observer at this high-level working group. The general theme of speakers echoed what we have heard in other discussions: Ghana does not want to miss the boat on biotech, but it also wants to ensure that it does not dive in without mechanisms to regulate misuse. End Comment.)
YATES